

Rules of the Game

Actions (Part Two)

By Skip Williams



Last week, we took a look at actions in general and at circumstances that prevent you from acting. This week, we'll consider nonactions and the specifics of the disabled condition. We'll also consider free actions.

Kinds of Nonactions

As noted in Part One, a nonaction is something that effectively takes you no time at all, but still requires some attention or effort. The rules don't go into any detail about the kinds of nonactions in the game, but for our purposes they fall into three categories:

Aggressive Nonactions: There's only one activity that falls into this category: the attack of opportunity. An attack of opportunity is similar to the attack action. In general, if you cannot use a standard action during your turn, you also cannot make an attack of opportunity during someone else's turn. When the notes on conditions in Part One say that you cannot act (for example, when stunned), you cannot make an attack of opportunity.

It's worth noting here that to threaten a space on the battlefield you must be able to make an armed attack into that space (see [Rules of the Game: All About Attacks of Opportunity](#)). If you cannot use at least a standard action you cannot make an armed attack into any space.

The rules don't say so, but making an attack of opportunity should be considered strenuous; if you make an attack of opportunity while disabled, you take 1 point of damage after completing the attack.

Nonactions with Other Actions: When you can't perform the main action, you can't perform any nonactions that might accompany it. For example, if you can't use a standard action, you cannot activate most magic items and you also cannot make a Use Magic Device check to activate an item that requires a standard action to activate.

You can take a 5-foot step anytime you don't otherwise move across the battlefield. You usually take a 5-foot step before, after, or during another action. The rules don't say so, but it's best to assume that you cannot take a 5-foot step unless you can take at least a move action during your turn.

Reactive Nonactions: It's usually best to allow characters to use nonactions, such as making opposed checks to resist being tripped or grappled, unless they're helpless (any ability score reduced to 0, paralyzed, petrified, or unconscious). It's worth noting, however, that even a helpless character can make a Reflex save (albeit with a -5 penalty for an effective Dexterity score of 0). That's because the game generally favors at least some involvement from the player -- and a chance for a miraculous escape -- whenever a character is in danger.

A player reasonably can expect to make opposed checks that have a basically defensive nature, such as resisting a trip or grapple, even when a character is helpless. In such cases, the opposed check really represents

fate intervening to foil the attacker rather than any determined resistance on the defender's part. No matter what kind of opposed check a helpless character makes, its best to apply a -5 penalty on the check for a relevant ability score that's effectively 0 when the action is basically physical (such as avoiding being tripped or grappled).

All that said, a character cannot make or succeed at some opposed checks. For example, a blind character cannot make a Spot check to see a hidden foe, nor can a deaf character make a Listen check to hear someone sneaking up on her.

The Disabled Condition

As noted in Part One, you're limited to one standard action or one move action (but not both) when you're disabled. You cannot use a full-round action while disabled.

If you use a standard action or do anything strenuous while disabled, you take 1 point of damage after completing the action. The rules leave it to the DM to decide what's "strenuous." Since a standard action deals you damage when you're disabled, however, you can use the list of standard actions shown on Table 8-2 in the *Player's Handbook* as a guide. Anything that resembles one of the standard actions shown there probably is sufficiently strenuous to hurt you when you're disabled. For example, making an attack of opportunity (as noted earlier) resembles the attack action and you take 1 point of damage if you make an attack of opportunity while disabled. Likewise, casting a quickened spell (a free action) also deals you damage because it's similar to casting a spell as a standard action.

Some options you have when disabled aren't obvious. For example, the charge action is a full-round action; however, you can charge as a standard action when you're limited to standard actions (such as during a surprise round). You also can charge as a standard action when disabled; you take 1 point of damage when you do so. You also can withdraw as a standard action when disabled, but you also take 1 point of damage when you do so.

When an action you take when disabled deals you damage, you complete the action first, then take the damage. Since you have 0 hit points when disabled, you usually collapse and immediately begin dying. If the action you use gains you hit points, you still take 1 point of damage for using a standard or strenuous action while disabled, but your condition after taking that damage depends on your current hit point total. For example, you have 0 hit points and are disabled. You cast a *cure light wounds* spell that gives you 5 hit points. After casting the spell, you take 1 point of damage, leaving you with 4 hit points. Because you have a positive hit point total, you are not dying or disabled after taking the damage.

The Free Action and Its Relatives

As noted in Part One, a free action is something you do during your turn that takes hardly any time at all. Many people believe that a free action never provokes an attack of opportunity, but that is not a feature of free actions. It is true, however, that free actions rarely provoke attacks of opportunity. For example, none of the free actions noted on page 144 of the *Player's Handbook* provokes attacks of opportunity.

PH pg 144: "Free Actions: Free actions don't take any time at all, though your DM may limit the number of free actions you can perform in a turn. Free actions rarely incur attacks of opportunity. Some common free actions are as follows: Drop an Item, Drop Prone, Speak, Cease Concentration on Spell, Cast a Quickened Spell."

You usually can perform a free action before, after, or during another action, circumstances permitting. For example, dropping an item is a free action. If you also move during your turn, you could drop an item at any point during the move. On the other hand, speaking a few words also is

a free action. If you move, you could speak at any point during your move, but you could not speak while simultaneously casting a spell with a verbal component. If you tried to do so, you'd interrupt your own spell. You could, however, speak a few words before or after casting the spell. Likewise, you can cast only one spell at a time. You can't cast a quickened spell while casting another spell. When in doubt about when a free action can occur, the player and DM should discuss the matter.

You cannot use a free action during another creature's turn. For example, speaking is a free action, but if you know where an invisible creature lurks, you can't tell a colleague where the creature is the moment your colleague acts. (You could ready such an action, however; see Part Four.)

It's Like a Free Action but It Isn't

The *Expanded Psionics Handbook* introduced two new kinds of actions that are very similar to free actions. Like free actions, these actions take little or no time. Unlike free actions, there are strict limits on how many of these actions you can use in a single turn and when you can use them. Here's an overview:

Swift Actions: You can perform one (and only one) swift action during your turn. A swift action is otherwise just like a free action.

Immediate Actions: You can use an immediate action any time, even during another creature's turn. If you use an immediate action during your turn, you cannot use a swift action during your next turn. You cannot use another swift or immediate action until after your next turn.

What's Next?

That wraps up our look at nonactions and the disabled condition. Next week, we'll examine a few specific actions and how they function in play.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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